

[Patricia Minichiello, Rutland Herald](#)

Ed Brown is a U.S. Air Force veteran of both the Korean and Vietnam wars. He has dropped bombs from C-130s at 29,000 feet altitudes and rolled out napalm at 10,000 feet. But he said Wednesday there's a difference between the combat he's seen and today's veterans.

"We didn't see the people we dropped bombs on. This is a new type of warfare. It's personal. These guys are in the streets, face to face with the people they kill."

Brown, commander of the Vermont American Legion, said this new combat situation is traumatizing to the psyche of all soldiers, and "anyone who serves in combat is screwed up one way or another."

As one of about eight people who participated in a roundtable with Democratic U.S. Congressman Peter Welch in Rutland on Wednesday, Brown stressed the realities of modern warfare and spoke candidly when Welch asked what can be done to assist returning soldiers.

"The cost of the war must include the cost of the warrior," Brown said. It was a mantra Welch repeated later in the discussion as he pledged support for funding of mental-health services for veterans.

"There is really a bipartisan commitment to maintain funding for veterans. The question is sustaining it when America's attention turns to something else," Welch said.

During the roundtable, Welch ask the group — ranging from military veterans to mental health experts — what the challenges are facing soldiers returning from war and what can be done to ease those challenges.

Some of the ideas mentioned included more funding for mental health treatments, peer to peer contact, virtual reality treatments, telemedicine and reaching out to soldiers who are not seeking help.

Robert Walton, director of the VA hospital in White River Junction, said one of the biggest challenges today is getting soldiers to seek help. He said people have symptoms but they not seeking treatment.

Andrew Pomerantz, director of mental health services at the VA hospital in White River Junction, said one way to help encourage soldiers to seek treatment is peer-to-peer contact.

Welch said peer-to-peer contact was an excellent method of treatment. "The people who make the biggest difference to veterans are fellow veterans."

He also said Vermonters are thankful to soldiers for stepping up and the least we can do is provide them with the services they need when they come back.

"We don't want to leave these folks high and dry depending on what the political sentiment about the war is," Welch said.

Col. Jon Coffin, director of adult outpatient services at the Howard Center in Burlington, said he hopes funding for vets continues to be a priority on the federal level and does not fade away. In terms of treatments, Coffin said they are trying a state-of-the-art technique called virtual reality treatment. The idea is to gradually re-introduce the patients to the experiences that triggered trauma — such as the sound of gunshots or sight of smoke — until the memory no longer incapacitates them.

As for other treatment methods, Welch posed the idea of telemedicine and asked if interactive consulting either over the telephone or on the computer would be effective in treating patients. All agreed telemedicine would be effective, particularly Coffin.

"Telemedicine is a beautiful thing," Coffin said.

Before initiating talks on funding and treatment Wednesday, Welch began with a moment of silence for Spc. Ryan Grady, a 25-year-old combat engineer from West Burke who was killed last week when his patrol vehicle was struck by an explosive in Afghanistan.

Welch also acknowledged the largest deployment of National Guardsmen in Vermont history and shed perspective on Vermont's first heat wave since 2003.

"You know what, it's hot out today, but this is like a typical day in combat. We have 1,500 Vermonters who are walking around in Afghanistan in this kind of heat everyday carrying around 80 pounds of equipment." Everyone must work together to do as much for these soldiers as possible when they return, he said.

As the roundtable wrapped, Welch asked participants to call him with more input on how Congress can be supportive of mental-health services for veterans.

"It's not just a matter of spending money. It's spending it right so that the services we are providing are meaningful to the veterans."